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Grouping

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INTRODUCTION

Grouping is a very important and controversial issue in the organization and operation of schools and classrooms.

To promote the learning of all pupils, to facilitate the work of the classroom teacher, and at the same time to increase the effectiveness of the educational program, schools adopt various patterns of classroom grouping.

Grouping should be a flexible kind of classroom organization for adjusting the curriculum to the needs and abilities of class members. It is a means to an end, not an end in itself.

A. BASIS FOR GROUPING

For initial reading activities, groups may be formed on the basis of data obtained from standardized reading readiness tests, from systematic observation, or both. If a systematic program for the prefirst-grade testing of children has not been set up, then the teacher should work with the pupils a few days before tentative groupings are made. An entire reading readiness test may be given to certain pupils to provide needed data, or parts of a test may be administered to obtain specific information of certain types of development.

When using a basal reading readiness book or an experience approach, the experienced teacher may detect individual needs through observation of responses.

Deficiencies in background of information may be exhibited by a child with limited vocabulary or by one who has too few facts to contribute to a discussion. Deficiencies observed by the teacher may be crucial factors to be considered in grouping.

Grouping of students should be on the basis of children's interests. In the elementary school, group interests are served by activities and projects suited to pupil tastes and talents. If, after grouping, it is discovered that the child's felt interests and needs are temporarily or generally more in keeping with those of another group, he would join the group whose pursuits are most in accord with his interests.

If the child is less able than others in the group with which he shares his interests, the program should be flexible enough to provide tasks at his level and thus to facilitate the next step in his growth. Similarly, a child who is more able than others will grow still more able. Both of these children will be growing and working with interests shared by other children in their group, and both will be learning to work with children of similar interests.

Oftentimes children are grouped for social purposes. Children who have similar interests usually like to work together as a social group. The available evidence, limited though it may be, shows that the small-group technique stimulates social learnings to a much greater degree than is possible with mass instruction practices if a competent classroom teacher has the material and facilities he needs.[1]

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[1] J. Wayne Wrightstone, Class Organization for Instruction, p. 16

B. SIZES OF GROUPS

Variation of sizes of groups may range from one child to the class as a whole. At times the teacher may work with an individual pupil in order to give him special individual instruction at the level of his competency. At other times the teacher instructs the class as a whole. All of the children are engaged in activities related to the whole class experience. The inexperienced teacher should probably be satisfied by dividing the class into two groups: those ready for initial reading instruction and those in need of systematic instruction to develop readiness for reading. After these groups are organized and under way, it is a relatively simple matter for the teacher to break down each group into two sections on the basis of rate of progress and/or needs.

C. FLEXIBILITY OF GROUPING

There is a general agreement that the key to the successful administration of a grouping plan is flexibility. All grouping of pupils should be tentative in the sense that any pupil may be moved from one group to another as his achievement or deficiencies warrant such transfer. I have found that occasionally in my first-grade classroom a child from the lowest reading readiness group has progressed to the top reading group during the first six months of school. Likewise, some of the children's reading aptitude has been over estimated, in which instance the fast-moving group was too much for them. The difficulty and purpose of reading materials must be adjusted constantly for children, for, when a child works at the level at which he can achieve, he will ordinarily improve steadily. Flexibility of grouping promotes personality development by challenging the pupil with appropriate learning situations and by avoiding those in which he might be frustrated by tasks too easy or too difficult. Betts states that flexibility of grouping is essential for a number of reasons:

1. The activities in an interesting classroom vary from hour to hour and from day to day, necessitating different types of contributions and therefore providing different opportunities for achieving. Hence, groupings should be a constantly changing membership to meet class needs.

2. Flexible grouping builds rapport - or harmonious working relationships - between members of the class. No teacher should ever be guilty of assigning a given individual to a dumb group or a bright group so that he is stigmatized by a teacher-made label. One label can be just as bad in its effect on the individual as

another. Flexible grouping facilitates the development of confidence and self-respect in the things the individual can do.

3. Flexible groupings provide equal learning opportunities in all school room activities. Successful teachers make their groupings flexible and tentative because the procedure is psychologically solid.[1]

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[1] Paul McKee, The Teaching of Reading in the Elementary School, p. 391

D. INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES

Any elementary teacher knows that the various pupils entering any given grade at the opening of school are by no means equal in abilities, interests, experiences, background, and reading achievement. In the second-grade class, some children will read no more effectively than many first-grade pupils who are just beginning to read a so-called first reader. Others will read as well as many pupils who are reading books used commonly by fourth-grade children. In the third-grade class, the poorest reader will read no better than the so-called average first-grade child, and the best reader will be able to read books used commonly in the fourth or sixth-grade classes. Between the poorest and the best reader in each class, the remaining thirty or more pupils will have various degrees of reading ability. These wide differences among the reading abilities and needs of children make it advisable if not imperative that those pupils be grouped for instructional purposes.

Studies show that the following ranges apply in reading comprehension, vocabulary, mechanics of English composition, and mathematics:

--At the first-grade level, the range of achievement is between three andfour years
--At the fourth-grade level, the range of achievement is between five and six years
--At the sixth-grade level, the range of achievement is between seven and eight years
--At the secondary level, the assumption can safely be made

> that the range of achievement will be equal to or even wider than at the sixth-grade level.[1]

The wide range of these abilities and the different degrees of preparation within a group constitute a pressing problem. This situation could be met to some degree by better pupil grouping within the class.

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[1] J. Wayne Wrightstone, op.cit., p. 15

E. HOMOGENEOUS AND HETEROGENEOUS GROUPING

Many forms of homogeneous grouping have been tried, and many bases for the groupings have been used. The most widely used is mental ability grouping. There is much to be said both for and against segregation of gifted children from the slow learners.

The results of studies of segregation are not consistent. In one experiment with sixteen boys and girls, it was found that their scores on achievement tests were only slightly higher than those of a control group. By more subjective standards, however, they were found to be "higher" in initiative, self-assurance, tenacity, and other traits involving emotional and social growth. Other studies have yielded somewhat different findings. Specialists in psychology, however, seem to favor classes for the gifted in the elementary school and mildly support the practice in the junior high school. [1]

Homogeneoud ability grouping presents special problems for experimentation and study. One of the chief problems has been to find a suitable basis for ability grouping. Intelligence test ratings, achievement in reading, teachers' marks and other various methods have been used as criteria. The most significant problem is that of the program itself, for if some pupils are separated

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[1] Paul McKee, op. cit., p. 393.

from others, there arises the task of creating a special curriculum for them. Each child must be provided with a program that is stimulating and challenging so that the whole self of each child can be developed every step of the way.

Also, difficulties of ability grouping arise from erroneous assumptions. One assumption is that achievement in reading and other school subjects is dependent upon a child's intelligence and that the relation between intelligence and achievement is static. Pupil motivation, attitudes, interests, and teaching practices provide a dynamic, not a static, relationship between intelligence and achievement.

There is much to be said both for and against ability grouping. Democracy implies an opportunity for each individual to make the most of his capabilities and to enjoy the best advantages his community can provide for that purpose. There can be no valid objection, therefore, to separate grouping, provided, of course, it is followed by provision of the right kinds of opportunities. Equal opportunity does not mean that everyone should do the same thing. It is not democratic to force gifted children to endure repetition of things they already know, or deny them the opportunity to develop their abilities. It is undemocratic to force slow pupils to attempt things they cannot do. Community sentiment sometimes makes a policy of ability grouping unwise. There is probably not enough to be gained from ability grouping to warrant proceeding in the absence of wholehearted community support. In considering ability grouping the administration faces the problem of avoiding the risk of

exaggerating the importance of slow-learning as well as the tendency of separate classes to become catchalls for all kinds of misfits. If such competition, rivalry, and striving for high marks is prevalent in the school, brighter pupils will almost inevitably look down on slower ones and take advantage of every opportunity to increase their own self-regard and display superiority.

We will probably have to agree that it is easier to organize and manage a school without separated classes for ability groups. Where there is not ability grouping, the child is not labeled. No scheme of naming, lettering, or numbering sections is ingenious enough to prevent pupils or their parents from learning what they mean. If one deliberately chooses to group pupils by ability, he must accept as a matter of course that the pupils will know the meaning and insignificance of the various groups. Any other assumption is sheer self-delusion.

Regardless of how tactful or clever a teacher is in handling ability groups, we know that many parents and children experience a considerable amount of anxiety because of the stereotyped method of trying to group children according to ability. It causes anxiety in many children and in many ways is a handicap in learning to read. There is, of course, the thrill for the child who manages to progress upward to a more advanced group, but there is also the discouragement of the slow learner or the late developer who feels quite sure that he will never get beyond belonging to a slow group.

Is a child likely to accept himself as a worthy person if his parents, his peers, and his teachers think of him as someone in the "dumb group"? Is he likely to develop into a self-confident and capable individual in an atmosphere where the boundaries for his learning become somewhat "set"?

Children tend to accept themselves more readily when they feel a measure of success as they work toward goals that are realistic for them. Self-acceptance fosters acceptance of others and contributes to wholesome living for all those who are affected. When self-confidence and self-respect are not seriously threatened, most children learn to read; and greater achievement is assured when individual differences are met in ways that take advantage of the many resources which differences provide. Individualized ways of teaching reading help to do this. If teachers are able to help pupils devise and carry on individual and small-group activities reflecting wide ranges of ability and interest, if the teachers are willing and able to accept at face value a different kind and quality of participation from different pupils, and if special material and other resources essential for slow learners are available in sufficient quantity to permit using them in many classes, there is little reason for going to the extra work involved in separate grouping.

Homogeneous grouping has been less widely used because there are wide differences even in a so-called ability group class and because it is difficult to avoid labeling classes as bright, average, or slow. Those in favor of heterogeneous grouping say that ability grouping does not really eliminate

wide ranges. They point out that heterogeneous grouping helps to provide a more normal social situation for children of elementary school age. They say that it encourages an atmosphere in which children have the opportunity of working with others of varied and diverse talents. They emphasize that personal and social learnings are as important as academic ones.

Although contradictory findings have come from the many studies, a summary of the evidence slightly favors ability grouping as contrasted with heterogeneous grouping in academic learning. The evidence for ability grouping indicates greatest relative effectiveness in academic learning for dull children, next greatest for average children, and least for bright children.[1] Classroom teachers have differences of opinion about ability grouping, but several studies reveal that a majority of teachers prefer it.

Betts feels that homogeneous grouping adds regimentation to classroom plans for the school day, contributes to school administrative problems, makes integration of school activities more difficult.[2] No valid conclusions can be drawn regarding the effects of ability grouping upon the personal characteristics of pupils.

We must recognize that there is still much debate as to the advisability of using ability grouping. Some school systems

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[1] J. Wayne Wrightstone, op. cit., p 26

[2] Paul McKee, op. cit., p. 723

have tried it and given it up as impractical. Other school systems have used ability grouping for a long time and maintain that it is a complete success.

F. GROUPS WITHIN THE CLASS

In recent years, teachers and supervisors in elementary schools have increasingly organized sub groups within a class in attempting to meet the problem of individual differences. Many first grades have planned for all children in the first grade to do the same things. Therefore, when the more mature children wanted to read, as they were quite prepared to do, the less mature children had to do the same thing; or the first grade may have had two groups, one for the fast and the other for the slow. Then if a few children were still not ready when the rest of the slow group were, they were then forced to start too soon. To meet this situation the teacher may form three small groups of pupils. One small group may be composed of pupils who are ready to learn to read and can begin to learn to read immediately.

In intermediate grades the high group may use relatively difficult books intended for that level or perhaps for a higher grade level. The average group may use books of average difficulty intended for that grade level. The low group may use relatively simple books intended for that grade level or unlabeled books intended for lower grade levels.

G. UNGRADED PRIMARY GROUPING

Today many educators support multi-grade classes. Under this plan grade designations are abolished. Children are placed in ungraded primary classes with children who may be a little older or younger but who do not differ too greatly in achievement, especially in reading. This plan has been in operation in Milwaukee, with some modifications, since 1942.

Dr. Walter Rehwoldt and Dr. Warren Hamilton support the broad hypothesis that grouping patterns should be based upon differences among children, rather than upon similarities. When we have these greater differences in a group, the following appear to be some of the factors which contribute to the enhanced learning environment:

1. Younger children are stimulated by working with other children.

2. Older children increase and strengthen their academic and social learnings by working with younger children.

3. Grade standards are minimized, which results in a greater and beneficial individualization of instruction.

4. The wide range of experience, capacity and interest brings greater enrichment to the classroom program.

5. Less peer rivalry contributes to better social and personal adjustment.

H. GROUPING FOR READING INSTRUCTION

Adequate reading ability is essential both for the pupil's school success and for his emotional and social adjustment. Under prevailing conditions of instruction, many children fail to achieve adequate reading ability. On the other hand, when instruction has been adjusted to the individual needs of the learners, many children have been successful who almost certainly would have failed without this adjustment. Other children who have already failed have become successful when given remedial instruction adjusted to their interests and needs.

Recognition of individual differences is most important when approaching reading. Probably one of the biggest barriers to a successful first reading in some schools is a lack of pupil readiness. It has been found that as many as forty to sixty per cent of all elementary school children in some schools are completely frustrated by the difficulty of the basal reading materials they are using. This was found to be true even in some situations where the children were supposedly organized into small groups for directed reading activities. One of the worst pitfalls in reading instruction is that of giving children materials to read that are entirely too difficult. A second pitfall is that of giving a child a one hundred per cent diet of material that is not challenging because it is too easy. Children cannot be expected to manifest much enthusiasm in the first

reading when they are bogged down by word recognition and comprehension problems.

When basal readers or any type of basal textbooks are used, some provision must be made for recognizing individual differences in needs, interest, and capacities. It appears then that one way to cope with this situation is to have grouping for individualized teaching.

It should be explained that individualized ways of teaching reading do not eliminate groups. There may be many groups in individualized plans, but they are centered around a variety of needs and purposes rather than around ability to learn. Groups based on interest, jobs to be done, and friendship are examples. In some instances children with similar difficulties may for a time work together, but the teacher should not do anything which might cause children to feel that they are a member of either a fast, slow, or average ability group.

A rich classroom environment is necessary for individualized reading instruction. Many carefully selected books, interest centers, and the use of every opportunity where reading meets a need are essential. The teacher should be alert, should radiate interest herself. With little encouragement children will bring this and that for the interest centers. The writer is especially pleased with a reading project fostered in her room this week. A picture of a former member of the class appeared in the daily paper. It pictures the boy with a snake he had been given for a Christmas gift. Three children brought a copy of the picture.

The pictures were the basis for much conversation and language expression. Three charts were made, and even the slower readers can read these charts with ease. The children found great satisfaction in being able to read the charts.

In the writer's opinion, individualized reading plans provide many rich opportunities to help children make the best of their abilities and resources. There are few limits to bind them if the environment is rich with opportunities to read, to communicate and share with an appreciative audience what they learn.

SUMMARY

Grouping and regrouping within any grade or age level--for various instructional purposes should be a normal part of classroom procedure. Reading groups, special interest groups, committees, and the like should be formed from time to time, depending on the needs and interests of individuals and the nature of the various activities being carried on in a classroom. Such groups are formed when needed and dissolved when they have served their purpose.

Good grouping promotes learning. Grouping should be on the bases of interests and needs. Size may range from one child to the class as a whole. All grouping of pupils should be tentative so that any pupil may be moved from one group to another as interests or needs require.

Pupils should be grouped so that each group contains those individuals who can profit from the same instruction. It is imperative that each pupil receive instruction from which he can profit most.

Available experimental evidence on instructional provisions for meeting individual differences at the elementary school level favors groups within the class. It is the writer's opinion that individualized reading, although much of it is done through group situations, is an effective way of helping children learn to read. Good grouping helps to free children for creative and meaningful reading on their respective levels of development.

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